DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 586 CS 203 888

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TITLE Barriers to Communication: Why Executives Won't Talk.
PUB DATE 13 Jun 75
NOTE 8p.; Speech presented before the Rotary Club of Los Angeles, June 13, 1975

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Responsibility; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; *Leadership Responsibility; Mass Media; *Organizational Communication; Public Relations
IDENTIFIERS Freedom of Information

ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that successful leaders in business and the professions have shown reluctance to assume leadership in the world of ideas, a reluctance they should attempt to overcome. The paper first examines some barriers and constraints that interfere with the clear communication of business leaders' ideals and purposes, such as the complexity of mass communications and recent threats to freedom of information. The paper then lists specific reasons why business and professional leaders may be reluctant to communicate their ideas. Finally, the author urges business leaders to attempt to communicate openly and offers suggestions for achieving this goal. (GW)

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BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION: WHY EXECUTIVES WON'T TALK

A speech by James F. Fox, President, Public Relations Society of America and Chairman, James F. Fox, Inc., New York, before The Rotary Club of Los Angeles, Club No. 5, at the Hilton Hotel, Los Angeles, California, June 13, 1975.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Few of you, I am sure, read the comic strips; but, if you did, you would be acquainted with a cartoon character named Ziggy. Not long ago, Ziggy was confronted on the street by a newly landed Martian. And, Ziggy said to him: "No, I won't take you to my leader. He has enough problems already."

It is some of these problems of leadership that I want to talk about today.

In my career in public relations over three decades, nothing has concerned me more than the reluctance of successful business and professional men and women to take leadership in the world of ideas.

I am puzzled particularly because there is not a man in this room who does not devote a great deal of his time to the civic and cultural affairs of his own community. That, of course, is the idea of Rotary. It is, of course, also a unique American concept. As directors of the National Center for Voluntary Action, both Mrs. Leslie Shaw, who is here on the platform, and I can confirm to you that there are 40 million Americans who give some of their time as volunteers in a vast number of community, charitable, health and civic enterprises. But, these same leaders, for the most part, leave city hall, the state house and Washington to others. It is as though politics and the economic system itself, which is the bulwark of human dignity and liberty, were somehow beneath them.

The consequences of this is that the pseudo-intellectuals are winning the battle of ideas. The very system which permits Rotary to exist and volunteerism to dominate community life is endangered. Liberty is badly eroded, and many wise observers agree that it will disappear entirely unless you become more involved in its defense. The need is to endure, but the challenge is to prevail.

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Burns Roper says that business is "probably the most faceless of all establishment institutions." But, I am concerned not just for the future of the open market system, for private business and industry. All institutions, the church, education, the foundations, the health care system, the professions, the labor unions, and even constitutional government itself are threatened by the silence of those who are best able to explain them, account for them, and give them credibility.

As president of the Public Relations Society of America, I might be expected to say to you that this is the job of public relations. If public relations is publicity; if public relations is an attempt to put things in their best light; if public relations is an adjunct to promotion, then public relations can do little to serve our institutions in this kind of conflict of ideology.

There is another kind of professional public relations based on research or fact-finding, on planning, on policy development and on performance. It presumes that public relations is more than communication. This kind of professional public relations service is available to you. But that is not my message. My message is that the mission demands a great deal of involvement from executive leadership, a degree of involvement to which few of you have been willing to commit yourselves. We are going to examine why this is so, and what you can do about it.

Walter Lippman pointed out to us more than half a century ago that the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are dependent on the reports of others to learn what goes on in the real world.

Many circumstances set up barriers and constraints which interfere with the clear communication of your ideals, purposes and performance in our society. Not the least of these is the volume, the complexity of the channels themselves. No society ever has had the opportunity to be well informed, as do Americans today. Indeed, the mass media have become our central nerve system. Every day we print 62 million newspapers. There are 122 million TV sets in the United States, 400 million radios. Americans buy and read a quarter of a billion copies of magazines each month. Add to this thousands of books, the education system, churches, clubs and political parties, the communication of business in reports and brochures, and motion pictures. No wonder that the first problem of anyone with a message is to break through the noise barrier, to be heard through the din.

But it is this complex mass communications system on which all of us must base our image of our environment beyond our meager personal experiences. In spite of the billions of dollars spent on advertising, which is the principle

financial support of the media, few business and professional leaders have taken the time to understand mass communications itself. Not so those who oppose your ideals; the intellectuals and activists and many political leaders know well how to turn this vast machinery to their own purposes.

Lippman in 1920 spoke of the "artificial censorships that limit access to facts, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives."

If Lippman were writing today, he would have to add to his list the distortions of advocacy reporting, the problems of instantaneous electronic communications, the economics of broadcasting and publishing which impede coverage of a vastly more complex world.

He would have to discuss direct attacks on the First Amendment, which have eroded the protection it was intended to give us. America today has more book burnings and book bannings than ever in its history. The activists have the urge to be heard, but they deny the civil rights of others, subverting publications, interrupting speakers, smearing those they oppose.

Some of the complex problems surrounding the First Amendment center around the FCC Fairness Doctrine. In addition, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press is alarmed about the "cumulative erosion of press freedom as never before witnessed under our Constitution" by the use of the power of the subpoena and the court order to silence the flow of information. In business public relations, we are confronted with the decisions of the regulatory agencies which inhibit the ability of business to explain itself: The FTC, the FCC, the FDA, the consumer agencies. In the oil crisis last year, the major oil companies learned, for example, that it was difficult to get acceptance of their editorial messages in paid space, on paid television time. The SEC has so increasingly set the parameters for financial communications, even to specifying the size type for annual reports, that investor relations has become a complex specialty. At the time of the Texas Gulf Sulphur case, I observed that the corporate executive under the disclosure rules may be the only person in our society who can be penalized for <u>not</u> communicating.

There now is under consideration in California and in Washington new legislation with the avowed good purpose of regulating lobbying. Unfortunately, the proposals are so ill-conceived that they would seriously impair political discussion

at every level in our society.

All of these threats to freedom of information should concern you. But, the one that should concern you the most is your own fear of communicating, or as Lippman put it, to face the facts which threaten you.

Businessmen particularly, seem to have a feeling of powerlessness today. Some accept the inevitability of government control and Socialism. Secretary Kissinger has said that as a historian he would have to believe that our system will not last. The chief executive of General Electric has questioned the ability of the private corporation to survive unless the environment changes.

Thus, it becomes worthwhile to ask the question: why do business and professional leaders show such reluctance to communicate? It is more than their lack of knowledge of the media or their distaste for conflict.

I once made up the following list:

1. Management believes that the public cannot absorb and understand what it has to say, that the problems are too complex to explain to ordinary people.

2. Management believes that its affairs are confidential.

3. Management fears that somehow its ideas will be twisted.

4. Or, management simply feels that it will be rebuffed, that the public will not agree with its views and that expressing them will only add fuel to the controversy. The exposure will only attract fire, or to use the jargon, will be counter-productive.

5. Management does not know what to say.

6. Or, is it true, as one executive suggested to me, that a single campaign would be like dropping an ice cube in the Pacific Ocean. The executive fears that he cannot go it alone, or even that his trade for professional society cannot make itself heard.

Many of these fears are well founded. But that is no reason for retreat.

A non-establishment friend of mine suggested last week that your reluctance to enter the marketplace of ideas could come from the lack of any ideas worth presenting.

You and I know that is not true.

As a public relations specialist, I believe that open communication, the one course of action the establishment has not tried, offers the best hope of preserving freedom, arresting the onrush to a centralized government, returning our society to some degree of volunteerism, and restoring the credibility of our institutions. Instead, you have left a wide information vacuum to be filled by consumer activists, politicians and by radicals who simply want to change the system.

The reason communication is not working for our institutions today is that the programs are starved to death, underfunded and understaffed. No one to my knowledge has tried to market an idea with the same persistence that industry markets a product. For all its fascination with risk/benefit ratios, business underrates the political and societal risks that are critical to its survival.

You no longer can depend on blocking adverse legislation in committees. Scotty Reston points out that when the mood of America is more conservative than at any time since World War II, your elected representatives in Congress were never more liberal. The Constitution no longer provides adequate protection for private property or freedom of speech. The mass media no longer offer you sympathetic channels of communication; they are largely the product of those who oppose you.

Consequently, you must rethink your attitude toward political and social involvement. Fortunately, every institution has within its own structure the skills, the systems, and the mechanisms for coping with the problem. It is conceivably a matter of weighing social and political inputs along with economic and technological projections in your strategic planning. A growing number of public relations professionals, following the work being done by General Electric analysts and other policy research specialists, have come to believe that a systems approach is required that relates public issues to corporate strategic planning. Such an approach provides the foundation for effective communication.

It is not enough to appoint a public issues committee of management or of the Board. It is not enough to engage in exercises in group dynamics or expose yourself to transactional analysis. You must apply the same fact-finding and analytical methods to these problems that your systems analysts apply to finance and operations.

Such a system of identifying, evaluating and tracking your environment will enable you to deal with current and prospective social pressures while you still have some options.

The saying goes that "the storm was no surprise to the barometer."

We know from observation of the past that almost every problem surfaces long before it reaches a crisis. The painters and artists of the world predicted the dissolution of the "society-that-was" in impressionism and abstraction. Every successful novelist projects the world as it will be when his book comes off the presses, months or years after it was written. And any legislative watcher will tell you that he can predict what bills will pass in Congress by tracing the history of those in the hopper. Without a proper business response the automotive safety law was predictable for ten years, as were truth in packaging, truth in lending, consumer protection, the environmental issues, and civil rights. As Ian Wilson of General Electric puts it, "today's expectations become the political issues of tomorrow, the legislated requirements of the next day, and the litigation of the day after that."

The best prospect for a viable measure of institutional initiative and vitality for the future is to be found in finding solutions to problems early, outwitting the activists at their game and then communicating results. The jargon is to be "pro-active." But, to be pro-active, you need first of all to have the barometer which a systems approach will provide.

With such a measure of the problems you face, you may well lose your fear of communicating. You certainly will have something to say and know how to say it. You will move quickly beyond mere compliance to an active role in the battle of ideas because you will be leading, not conforming to the ideas of others.

Let me conclude with these suggestions:

1. Stop thinking of public relations as amassing clippings. Public relations today is problem-solving.

2. Hire Accredited professionals; give them access to your long-range planners and your systems analysts.

3. Get involved personally and stay involved. Learn to be at ease in a newspaper interview, know how to speak on television. You cannot delegate this responsibility.

4. Be willing to provide adequate money for staffing and production, for research and analysis as though it were a matter of life and death <u>because it is.</u>

There are indeed formidable barriers to communication in our society today. You can scale the barriers. I have every confidence that you will.

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